

# Cultural Difference between the East and the West

## DIFFÉRENCES CULTURELLES ENTRE L'EST ET L'OUEST

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**Abstract:** With the development of globalization, cross-culture communication is indispensable to an open society in which we live today. Therefore, cultural differences are everywhere. The cultures between the East and the West are distinguished by a rather large scale. It means not only the opinions or ways of thinking are different, but how do people behave in daily life is also not the same, sometimes may even the opposite. This paper will first probe into the causes for cultural differences and then some of the typical examples to illustrate the cultural difference between east and west, and finally, ways to fit in different cultures.

**Key words:** culture, difference, east, west

**Résumé:** Avec le développement de la globalisation, la communication transculturelle est indispensable pour une société ouverte dans laquelle nous vivons aujourd'hui. Cependant, les différences culturelles se trouvent partout. Les cultures entre l'Est et l'Ouest sont distinguées dans une large mesure. Les façons de penser non seulement sont différentes, mais les comportements des gens dans la vie quotidienne ne sont pas les mêmes, parfois le contraire. L'article présent examine d'abord les causes des différences culturelles, puis montre des exemples typiques pour illustrer la différence culturelle entre l'Est et l'Ouest, et cherche finalement des moyens de s'adapter aux différentes cultures.

**Mots-Clés:** culture, différence, Est, Ouest

Culture, according to Robert Kohls, the former Director of Training and Development for the United States Information Agency, "is an integrated system of learned behavior patterns that are characteristic of the members of any given society, ...the total way of life of particular groups of people. It includes everything that a group of people thinks, says, does, and makes—its customs, language, material artifacts and shared systems of attitudes and feelings. Culture is learned and transmitted from generation to generation." It is not identical with the genetic heritage that may differentiate one group of people from another. These differences in shared systems of attitudes and feelings is one of those more subtle areas of difference that foreigners experience when they leave 'home.'

Culture affects people's ways of thinking and their views of the world. Every culture has its distinct characteristics that make it different from every other culture. Some differences are quite evident (e.g. language, religion, political organization, etc.). Others can be so subtle that while foreign visitors may be vaguely aware of them, making adjustments is a complex process and one may remain uncomfortable and off balance for quite some time.

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### 1. CAUSES FOR CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

The cultures of the East and the West really distinguish each other by a lot. This is because the culture systems are two separate systems on the whole.

The origin of the eastern cultures is mainly from two countries: China and India. Both of the two cultures are gestated by rivers: the Yellow River in China and the Hindu River in India. These two cultures were developed for several thousand years and formed their

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own styles. Then in Tang Dynasty of China, the Chinese culture gradually went overseas to Japan, mixed into the Japanese society and shaped the Japanese culture nowadays. Though a bit different from the Chinese one, it belongs to the same system.

When the two mother rivers gave birth to the eastern culture, another famous culture was brought up on the Mesopotamian Plain—the Mesopotamian Civilization. This civilization later on developed into the cultures of the Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome. And these two are well-known as the base of the European culture. Like the Chinese culture, the European one also crossed waters. When the colonists of England settled down in America, their culture went with them over the Atlantic Ocean. So the American culture is similar to the European one.

At the same time, the difference of the language systems adds to the cultural differences. In the East, most languages belong to the pictographic language while the Western languages are mostly based on the Latin system.

Other factors like human race difference counts as well. But what's more, due to the far distance and the steep areas between the East and West, the two cultures seldom communicate until recent centuries. So they grew up totally in their own ways with almost no interference from the other.

## **2. CULTURE DIFFERENCE EXHIBITED IN DAILY LIFE**

Numerous studies have been done to identify specific characteristics that distinguish one culture from another. The cultural difference between east and west is no exception. Let's sum up some of the typical examples to illustrate such differences.

### **Greeting**

How do we Chinese greet each other? Informally, if we meet a friend in the street, we are used to saying: "Hi, have you had your meal?" or "Where are you going?" When it is the case of two gentlemen, they tend to shake hands.

However, in the western countries, the above questions are just questions, not greeting at all. They may think you're inviting them to dinner if you ask about their meals. Usually, they'll just give each other a smile or greet with a "Hi". They'll shake hands only in some formal situations. By the way, Westerners can leave a party or meeting halls without a formal conge, nor should they shake hands with every attendee like most of us will do here.

### **Showing Gratitude**

Think of the situations below. Your mother is busy in the kitchen. She suddenly asks you to fetch a bowl for her. You do so. What'll your mother's response be? Probably she'll just continue doing the cooking. After a while, the dinner is ready. Your mother hands you your bowl of rice. What's your response? Probably just begin to eat.

Chinese rarely say "Thank you" to other family members for receiving help or service. Neither will we say so between good friends. It's such an unpopular response that if you say it, the counterpart will think you are treating him as a stranger, otherwise you are lacking of intimacy.

But in the West, "thank you" is one of the most frequently used sentences. Teachers will thank a student for answering a question; husbands will thank his wife for making a coffee.

### **Table Manners**

The ways people eat—the table manner, really distinguish a lot. Chinese use chopsticks or sometimes even grasp rice straightly with hands as Indians do. The thin and long chopsticks cannot be used to cut food, so we use teeth as knives. We hold our food, meat or vegetable, with the chopsticks, send them to the mouths, bite off a part and remain the other part on the chopsticks. That's the usual way we eat. We are also used to holding up our bowls when having rice or soup. But all these are considered rude in the Western countries.

The etiquette in the West requests that when eating, bowls and plates cannot leave the tables. Food should be cut by knives to fit into the mouths. Your mouth cannot touch the plates or bowls. So the regular process is cut your steak on the plate with fork and knife, send the meat cube into the mouth with fork and nothing will be returned back but the fork alone. The reason for this is probably because of the different dining tools and menus.

### **Symbolization**

Symbolization is how people imagine or regard something, which reflects the way of people thinking.

**The symbolization of color.** We often attach different significance to different colors, because we feel differently when facing different colors. On the last day in the APEC summit held in Shanghai several years ago, the presidents from all over the world wore the traditional Chinese Tang suits and took a photo together. The colors of the suits were chosen by themselves freely. However, it's quite interesting to find that most Easterners chose red while most of the westerners preferred blue. To explain this, it's easy to realize that what red means is almost opposite in the

East and the West. Red means luck, fortune here. Chinese often use this color to decorate in festivals, such as red lanterns, red Chinese nodes, and red bangers. But red stands for blood, revolutions in the West. So the presidents avoided wearing the unlucky color.

**The symbolization of dragon.** In the East, dragons are imagined as something like snake and are flowing in the sky for most of the time. The dragon is said to have the face of the horse, the horns of the deer, the ears of the ox, the body of the snake, the claws of the eagle and squama of the fish. We regard dragon as God and view ourselves the offspring of the dragon. The God of Dragons of the four seas can charge the rainfalls. But in the West, people think dragons as dinosaurs, which can stand on the ground with feet and fly with huge wings. They lay eggs just like dinosaurs. The dragons of the West have the ability to erupt fire, instead of water. The fire can destroy everything so the dragons are not welcomed at all. They even become the symbol of the Devil.

### 3. CULTURAL STEREOTYPE

Unfortunately, attempts to categorize cultural characteristics often end up in cultural stereotypes that are unfair and misleading. In adjusting to your study abroad environment, you will therefore have to deal not only with real cultural differences, and also with perceived cultural differences. Keep in mind that people of other cultures are just as adept at stereotyping we Chinese as we are at stereotyping them—and the results are not always complimentary. The following are a few examples of the qualities (some positive, some negative) that others frequently associate with the "typical" Chinese: hard working, being economical, reserved, ignorant of other countries, generous, hospitable, and superstitious. While a stereotype might possess some grain of truth, it is obvious when we consider individual differences that not every Chinese fits the above description. Most Germans, Japanese, Italians, etc., have stereotyped perceptions of 'the American,' just as most Americans have stereotyped images of 'Germans,' 'Japanese,' 'Italians,' etc. In short, misperceptions may exist on all sides. Frequently, the stereotype of the American is far from complimentary: the boorish tourist who expects everyone to speak English, the arrogant patriot who thinks every country in the world should pattern itself after the United States, the drunken reveler who sees the anonymity of traveling abroad as an opportunity to drop all civilized inhibitions—all have contributed to the development of this unfortunate stereotype. It is up to you to behave in a manner that will convince your hosts that this is indeed an unjustified stereotype that cannot be applied arbitrarily, at least to yourself.

### 4. SKILLS TO FIT IN A DIFFERENT CULTURE

Social customs differ greatly from one country to another. It is therefore impossible to give guidelines that will be applicable in every culture. Generally speaking, you can be yourself as long as you remain friendly, courteous, and dignified. Always keep in mind that you are the guest in someone else's country. Therefore, you would be safe to assume that your behavior should be regulated pretty much in the same manner as if you were the guest in someone else's home. On the other hand, as an outsider, especially if you err on the side of being respectful, some allowances are likely to exist for the things you do not immediately understand or feel comfortable with.

**Politeness:** In keeping with the relatively formal manner of social customs abroad, you should place much more emphasis on the simple niceties of polite social intercourse than you might at home. Be prepared to offer a formal word of greeting to whomever you meet in your day-to-day activities. For example, should you approach a clerk in the local market in Strasbourg always be courteous enough to begin your conversation with, "Bonjour, Madame (Monsieur, Mademoiselle)" before you launch into your inquiries about the products, and become familiar with the appropriate expressions of gratitude in response to your hosts' hospitality.

**Humor:** While each country has its own particular brand of wit and humor, very few cultures appreciate the kind of "kidding" that which Americans are accustomed. Comments, even when intended to be humorous, can often be taken quite literally.

**Speaking of the Language:** When it comes to language, most people will be extremely flattered rather than amused at your efforts to communicate in their native language. Do not be intimidated or inhibited when practicing your own limited command of the language. Avoid slang expressions, which are usually unique to the particular culture, and which may therefore be totally meaningless or inappropriate in the context of another culture. Be aware of the differences between the "familiar" and the "polite" forms of address and be sure to use them properly. Do not try to translate idiomatic expressions direct into the native language. Idioms as a whole may be complete nonsense when translated into another language.

**Physical Contact:** Physical contact may not be especially appreciated or understood by someone unfamiliar with the American idea of camaraderie; a cheerful pat on the back or a warm hug may be quite embarrassing and uncomfortable in western cultures. All cultures have different notions about social space, for instance how far away to stand or sit when conversing, or how to shake hands or wave farewell. Restraint is advisable until you learn how the locals do it and what they expect of you.

To sum up, social customs differ from one country and culture to another, and there is simply no way you can fit in and be at home unless you learn what is and isn't appropriate behavior. It is impossible to make generalizations that can be applicable to every situation. Therefore, it is not inappropriate to inquire politely about local customs and social niceties. Expect things to be different overseas. One of the basic reasons for your participation in a abroad program should necessarily be

to develop a sensitivity to and appreciation for the people and customs of a totally different culture and way of life. Anyone who goes overseas demanding that everything be the same as what (s)he is accustomed to in China will be sorely disappointed and probably better served by staying at home. Be flexible and receptive in dealing with these differences and you will find your own life experiences will be greatly enriched.

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